



Jeffrey Herf, Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967–1989

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Jeffrey HERF, *Undeclared Wars with Israel: East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 493 pp, ISBN 978-1-107-46162-8

This monograph originates from an effort to delegitimize left-wing campaigns against the state of Israel and its policies in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Herf looks at both the East German government and at radicals of the West German Far Left – which he does not define stringently – in their conduct towards Israel in the period between the Six-Day War and the collapse of the GDR. He argues that both were strongly influenced by an inextricable mix of anti-Zionism and antisemitism, which amounted to systematic support for those who wanted to destroy the state of Israel. For Herf, these attitudes and policies developed, through a combination of ideology and self-interest, into sustained “undeclared wars” and a comprehensive master narrative of an aggressive Israel in the context of the repeated military clashes between Israel and various Arab coalitions. Simultaneously, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) adopted a terrorist strategy, and an anti-Israeli majority emerged in the United Nations General Assembly. This stood in sharp contrast with the West German government’s policy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the Nazi past) and its moderate pro-Israel position. Herf presents his evidence in chronologically arranged alternating chapters that deal with his two fields of research: East Germany and the West-German Far Left. He shows how East Germany’s antagonism to Israel and its decision to support the Palestinians and Arabs was nurtured by Soviet-bloc policy makers interpreting Israel’s military strikes as manifestations of an aggressive and imperialist conspiracy, and by an increasingly successful attempt to use the Arab states as a wedge against West German efforts to isolate East Germany diplomatically. The New Left in West Germany initially took a more friendly approach to Israel, but since 1967, and in the name of

anti-imperialist anti-fascism, armed groups – the Red Army Faction and the Revolutionary Cells – embraced a militant and propagandistic “war” against Israel, which, according to Herf, was supported by the vast majority of the Far Left.

Herf argues that the exercise of violence, with the ultimate intention to wipe out Israel, was omnipresent throughout the two decades under scrutiny. Yet, among the many lengthy quotations from East German diplomats that Herf conveys, we also find a few that make a point that tends to take a back seat in Herf’s analysis. In August 1974, for example, the GDR’s political strategy emphasised that “Israeli withdrawal from ‘all of the territories occupied since June 5, 1967’ was ‘the fundamental precondition’ for Palestinian self-determination.” (275–276) The Israeli-occupied territories are hardly mentioned in Herf’s account, Israeli settlements in these areas ignored completely, and the resulting political issues nowhere weighed or discussed. With Herf’s repeated pointers to the PLO Charter implicitly calling for the expulsion of the vast majority of the Jewish population living in Israel, there seems to be no room for mentioning, for example, that David Ben-Gurion favoured the return of most of the occupied territories and emphasised in 1969 that peace was more important than holding on to these territories. More generally, it is striking that Herf does not attempt to review or discuss the vast existing literature for any of his broad themes: antisemitism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the radical Left in West Germany (the works of Wolfgang Kraushaar are an exception), or the foreign policy of the Warsaw Pact. This distanced relationship with historiography manifests itself in the volume’s regrettable omission of any bibliography of secondary sources.

After 1959 the Federal Republic of Germany secretly became a significant supplier of military equipment and arms to Israel; covert cooperation in major armaments projects continued throughout the remainder of the Cold War and beyond. The exposure of West

German arms deliveries to Israel in the Egyptian press in the autumn of 1964 was a milestone in the rapprochement between East Germany and the Arab states; another omission in Herf's selective account. Until 1989, the GDR delivered approximately "750,000 Kalashnikov assault weapons; 120 MiG Fighter jets, 180,000 anti-personnel land mines; 235,000 grenades; 25,000 rocket-propelled grenade launchers; and 25 million cartridges" (453) to the Arab states and the Palestinian armed organizations. But in the midst of the Cold War, this amounted to only 3 percent of arms deliveries to the Arab-Palestinian coalitions from the Soviet bloc (2). Herf makes no effort to contextualise these figures with comparative evidence on other Cold-War arms deliveries from Israel, the United States or West Germany; his point is a moralistic one: German arms were again pointed at Jews, this time in an effort to eradicate the Jewish state. Similarly, Herf's outrage over left-wing radicals like Dieter Kunzelmann, Ulrike Meinhof and the Entebbe hijackers Brigitte Kuhlmann and Wilfried Böse does not so much derive from their concrete "impact on the Middle East [which] was in inverse proportion to the amount of media attention they received," (452) as from their violation of what Herf introduces at the very beginning of his book as "an unwritten eleventh commandment of West German history after the Holocaust, [...] that no German government or political group should kill or harm any more Jews or lend assistance to anyone else who was killing or harming Jews." (1)

What precisely is the evidence for Jews being killed as a result of political violence emanating from post-Holocaust Germany? Judging from Herf's book, although this is nowhere made explicit, there is none. In his conclusion, he cites "a bomb placed in the Jewish Community Center in West Berlin on November 10, 1969; numerous letter bombs sent to Jewish institutions; a bombing campaign by the Revolutionary Cells in the 1970s; and credible death threats" (452). None of these entailed any fatalities, and arguably they were

not designed to actually kill anyone. During the Yom Kippur War, East Germany secretly sent two freighters with heavy military equipment and a squadron of jet fighters to Syria. Herf's only evidence, however, for "Germans to exchange fire with Israeli armed forces" (318) are the Entebbe hijackers. He fails to offer any concrete evidence that would uphold this claim and contradict the abundant eye-witness accounts that suggest that Böse and Kuhlmann neither attempted to kill their hostages nor offered any resistance when they were killed by the Sayaret Matkal surprise attack that liberated most of the Israeli hostages. The actual basis for Herf's far-reaching indictment of the Left – "one of the most disgraceful chapters in German history since World War II" (450) – is their verbal, diplomatic, organizational, and military support for the wrong side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the Cold War. Leftists who became involved in these solidarity campaigns always rejected the notion that they, in their battles against "Zionist imperialism", engaged in antisemitism as slander. Herf succeeds in producing a number of quotes from East German archives and a selective reading of sources from the West German Left that contain highly aggressive and historically distorting statements against Zionism. Some of these can be interpreted as antisemitic. Throughout his book, Herf emphasises the implications in such statements of an intention to eliminate Israel, even if the sources also yield evidence that might call Herf's interpretations, which some readers may find contrived, into question. He is not primarily interested, however, in contextualising these statements or in explaining why exactly solidarity with the plight of the Palestinian people became plausible, attractive, or lucrative in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Cold War. Herf's objective is the articulation of moral outrage, and his book seeks to explain solidarity with the PLO with reference to the German Left's antisemitism, totalitarianism, and its efforts to avoid the burden and consequences of the German past vis-à-vis Israel.